

## THE MINISTERIAL FOOTHILLS:

### LABOUR GOVERNMENT JUNIOR MINISTERS 1997-2010

The diaries of the former Labour MP Chris Mullin have heavily influenced views about the role and significance of junior ministers in modern British government. Giving his ‘view from the foothills’ as a junior minister in three departments (Environment, Transport and the Regions and then International Development 1999-2001, followed by the Foreign Office 2003-05), Mullin complained in his diaries about his ‘pointless existence’ as a junior minister, the low-level drudgery, his ‘utter lack of influence’ and the absence of team working in government (Mullin, 2009). He had chaired a House of Commons select committee, and felt that was a better and more influential job. As a lowly Parliamentary Under Secretary he faced an ‘avalanche of tedium’, sometimes being little better than ‘a glorified correspondence clerk’ signing mountains of letters, at other times ‘running round in circles pretending to be busy’, engaged in ‘entirely contrived and pointless’ activities as the ‘Minister of Folding deckchairs’. He was not required to take many decisions, dealing only with ‘the crumbs that fall from the tables of my many superiors’. A memo ended up on his desk with a note still attached saying: ‘This is very low priority. I suggest we pass it to Chris Mullin.’ ‘I am now a figure of absolutely no influence’, he wrote, ‘reconciled to a period of total obscurity.’ He felt he had ‘disappear[ed] without trace’. Being a junior minister was not a job for a ‘grown-up’ (Mullin, 2009, pp.2,

12, 23, 30, 37, 161, 168, 191).

This article argues that Chris Mullin is only half-right. His diaries expressed his own frustrations rather than giving a full and accurate picture of the job of a junior minister. And although they have their uses, ministerial diaries can in general be overplayed in the literature on government and ministerial life. This article therefore draws upon original research in the form of a series of in-depth interviews with ministers and special advisers from the Labour government. The ten interviewees (two serving in the Lords) held between them 33 posts in 18 different departments or offices from 1997 to 2010, including as special advisers in two departments and Number 10 Downing Street, as whips and PPSs, and included each rank of government minister (Parliamentary Under Secretary, Minister of State, Secretary of State). The article aims to assess the role and influence of junior ministers in the Labour government, putting them in context against the background of the experience and position of junior ministers in previous British governments (Theakston, 1987; Theakston, 1999). A database built up on the 223 individuals who held junior ministerial office under Labour is also used to inform analysis of junior ministers' appointments and promotions during this period to bring out the patterns of continuity and change in ministerial career paths.

Our core argument is that junior ministerial jobs remain key apprenticeship posts in the British system, and though the experience can sometimes be a limiting and frustrating one (but not invariably so), they undertake many essential ministerial functions and help maintain political control and accountability in government. Starting with a discussion of

ministerial roles, the article moves on to discuss junior ministers' experience of office under Labour (highlighting the importance of political factors and personal relations, and assessing the differences between ministers at Minister of State and Parliamentary Secretary levels). It then analyses the special features of the work of junior ministers in the House of Lords before discussing the appointment and reshuffling of junior ministers under Labour and reviewing the data on junior ministerial career paths and career patterns 1997-2010.

### **Junior ministers' roles**

The picture depicted in Chris Mullin's diaries fits into a general trend of writing off junior ministers as marginal or irrelevant dogsbodies, and as political and departmental Cinderellas. Lord (Digby) Jones described the experience of being a junior minister as 'one of the most dehumanising and depersonalising experiences a human being can have. The whole system is designed to take the personality, the drive and the initiative out of a junior minister' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2009, q.283). The 'junior ministerial existence' was not 'a very happy one', according to former Cabinet Secretary Lord Turnbull, who argued that 'a lot of what they do could be done by officials' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2010a, q.48). A widely quoted civil service view is that 'the more junior ministers you have . . . the more work you have to find for them' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2009, p.10). Even the *Handbook for Ministers*, written by Whitehall's National School of Government as an introduction to the job for new ministers, suggested that at times junior

ministers would find that their role was to 'turn up on pointless parliamentary occasions to read some turgid waffle into Hansard on behalf of the department; go to meetings and conferences that the Secretary of State doesn't want to go to because they're essentially meaningless; be lobbied by NGOs that just want to be able to tell their membership that they've lobbied a minister and don't really care who it is . . . [and] sit in on meetings with more senior ministers who never ask your opinion' (Marshall, 2010, p.17).

On the other hand, the experience of Joyce Quin (whose service overlapped with that of Mullin as a successful, if low profile, junior minister in the Home Office, Foreign Office and Ministry of Agriculture 1997-2001) was that while the role of junior ministers could be frustrating at times because the most important decisions were taken at a higher level, 'there can be real job satisfaction'. 'Some jobs at the secondary level', maintained Quin, 'have substance and a proper measure of independence', with these junior ministers being able to take decisions, influence policy and make a difference in their own defined sphere (Quin, 2010, p. 28). Another Labour junior minister found that 'it was an interesting job, lots of decisions to be taken from day one.' Chris Mullin, in this minister's view, was 'a spectator not a player. If you insist on being a player you can be one. If you're featherbedded by the civil servants, doing speeches and receptions, you can ride the magic carpet but not be anything, and become a rubber stamp' (interview).

Junior ministers (like Cabinet ministers) have multiple roles, operate in a range of arenas and must juggle competing demands and expectations. Building on and updating Headey (1974), Marsh et al (2000) picked out Cabinet ministers' policy, political, executive/managerial, and public relations roles.

Rhodes (2012, pp. 52-55) also described ministers' work in terms of policy, political, managerial and 'diplomatic' roles, with ministers commonly playing all of them in different combinations. Working underneath and in support of Cabinet ministers, traditionally three broad areas of junior-ministerial activity could be identified: departmental work, parliamentary duties and 'ambassadorial' or 'representative' functions (Theakston, 1987). Malcolm Wicks – a Labour junior minister in three departments for nine years 1999-2008 – similarly identified four roles: ambassador and media spokesman for the department and government; authoriser of decisions processing the flow of departmental administration; handling parliamentary business; and policy-making and implementation (Wicks, 2012).

Comparing back to the 1970s and 1980s, the work on ministerial roles makes it clear that the public relations/ambassadorial role of ministers has in the last 20 years become more demanding and important, that ministers have taken on a more important and proactive role in policy-making relative to the civil service, and that relations with Europe and activities at the EU level loom much larger (Marsh et al, 2000, p. 320). Confirming a trend that was visible in the Conservative government in the late 1980s and 1990s (Theakston, 1999, p. 235), Rhodes argues that while some junior-ministerial work still involves detail, tedium and grind, and doing the jobs and chores that their superiors do not wish to do, a distinction needs to be drawn between the more 'dogsbody' functions of Parliamentary Under Secretaries and the delegation of responsibility for substantial and important blocks of work, with real autonomy to take decisions and push things forward, common at the Minister of State level (Rhodes, 2012, pp. 55, 90-101). Our research suggests, however, that much still depends on

political factors and personal relations at the ministerial level, and in some departments there was less of a sense of ministerial hierarchy and rank between different junior ministers (see below).

There was, overall, twice the number of junior ministers in the Blair/Brown governments compared to the great, reforming Attlee Labour government of 1945-51. Whereas Attlee had appointed 32 junior ministers in 1945 (29 Parliamentary Under Secretaries and three Ministers of State), Blair initially appointed 64 in 1997 (32 Parliamentary Secretaries and 32 at Minister of State level), the total reaching 65 when Brown left office in 2010 (29 Parliamentary Secretaries and 36 Ministers of State). The number of junior ministers under Labour was also up on the Thatcher/Major years of Conservative government (58 in 1979, rising to 61 in 1997). To get round the statutory limits on the number of appointments to paid ministerial posts, the number of unpaid ministers increased, fluctuating between one and five in 1998-2006 but increasing to 11 in 2007 and 13 in 2008. By the end of the Labour government, ten departments had teams of five or more junior ministers (Lord Mandelson presiding over nine junior ministers in his Department for Business, Innovation and Skills).

In constitutional terms, Labour's junior ministers remained in the same position as their counterparts in earlier governments. As the *Ministerial Code* stipulated, they had no formal or legal powers of their own: any executive authority they had was by delegation from their ministerial chief. They shared in the government's collective responsibility to parliament but in policy terms they were formally responsible to their Secretary of State rather than to parliament (though in practice, if things went badly wrong, the junior minister sometimes

ended up walking the plank). Ministers were encouraged in the *Ministerial Code* to devolve responsibility to their junior ministers for a defined range of departmental work and many—particularly at Minister of State level—carried special titles denoting those duties (a practice first started back in the 1960s). Those ‘courtesy titles’ and the departmental assignment of duties had to be agreed with the Prime Minister (Cabinet Office, 1997, p.14).

### **The experience of office**

Under New Labour, as in previous governments, the scope and clout of junior ministers depended crucially on whether they had the confidence and backing of their Secretary of State. While some Cabinet ministers were good at delegating responsibility and running a team, others were not. David Blunkett notably ‘went out of his way to create teams and value people, to hear what people had to say’, said a former junior minister who served under him. ‘He would lay down the direction but then let you get on with it’ (interview). Blunkett also made a practice of phoning his junior ministers on Sunday evenings to listen to their views and involve them in his own thinking (Riddell et al, 2011, pp.18-19). John Prescott, in contrast, was described as constantly interfering in matters best left to junior ministers, with no sense of a coherent team developing – at so-called team meetings, Prescott would talk all the time (Mullin, 2009, pp.14, 24-5). Clare Short was dominant inside DfID, making policy across the board and leaving little for her junior minister to do – ‘she didn’t really need a junior minister’ complained one hapless subordinate (interview).

At the Foreign Office, Robin Cook was apparently neither a team player nor collegiate, and had little interest in the idea of regular team meetings. It could be difficult for junior ministers to get through Cook's private office gatekeepers to see him. He would delegate but when an issue in a junior minister's brief escalated up the media and diplomatic agenda, he would simply step in and take it over without discussing it with the junior. His successor, Jack Straw, in contrast, would readily seek the views of his FCO junior ministers and had regular team meetings. Straw was approachable and would listen to his junior ministers' advice and views (Hain, 2012, pp. 216-17). But there could be difficulties if a Secretary of State was jealous of the media coverage one of his/her junior ministers attracted, or was insecure about the junior minister's relationship with Number 10 (Hain, 2012, p.206). Occasionally, a junior minister was close to or had direct line to the prime minister, something that might make them a more effective minister, but could sometimes cause problems with their Secretary of State. Also, 'if they were thought to be disloyal it would create a huge problem' (interview). There were, for instance, high-profile disputes and a poisonous relationship between Social Security Secretary Harriet Harman and her Minister of State for Welfare Reform Frank Field – described by insiders as like 'cats in a sack' – that resulted in them both being fired in 1998. Field felt he should have been Secretary of State and knew more about the subject than his boss (Blunkett, 2006, p.85). They would openly argue with each at Cabinet committee meetings. Tony Blair later admitted that the pairing was 'a kind of "dating agency from hell" mistake' (Blair, 2010, p. 217).

A minister who worked under Ed Balls said 'his approach was, "It's your call – but if you've got a problem or a tough decision, let's talk." If it were a big



issue with media angles and so on, we would have a discussion at meetings. I would flag things up, give a head's up – his office was copied in so he was aware. Get it in the Secretary of State's box and make sure he's happy with it. There would be bilateral meetings as and when needed' (interview). From the other angle, a former Cabinet minister recalled that it was 'vital for the Secretary of State to keep in touch, to see copies of submissions and papers. You have to have confidence in your junior ministers – but if you don't, you take a closer interest. You form a judgement on them' (interview). 'Competence is crucial', said a Labour Special Adviser. 'We had a lot of PQs answered that led to bad publicity that had been signed off by a junior minister. So the Secretary of State had to get involved to deal with them' (interview).

Labour's ministerial teams did not always work well together. Some Secretaries of State did not hold regular meetings of their ministerial teams (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, p. 39). But mostly there was a mixture of political sessions or ministerial meetings without the civil service, and larger groups that brought in the Secretary of State's private secretary, perhaps the Permanent Secretary, the special advisers, PPSs, and the relevant departmental whip. 'We would have an hour or so', recalled one minister. 'What's coming up, what's on the grid for that week, what is everyone doing, what were the big issues facing the team, forthcoming plans. There was an agenda but it was fairly informal, with occasional presentations' (interview).

A Labour special adviser (SPAD), who later became an MP and minister, recalled that he regularly saw more of the Secretary of State as a SPAD than as a junior minister (interview). Some powerful special advisers, such as Ed Balls at the Treasury and Michael Barber at Education, certainly had more influence over

policymaking and with their Cabinet bosses than most junior ministers. But SPADs would work with junior ministers on things going on in their policy areas, and junior ministers would talk to SPADs and ask what the Secretary of State was thinking and discuss issues (interview).

And, as in other governments, it was clear that, as one junior minister said, 'the key test is that the civil servants know that you've got the confidence of the Secretary of State. If they feel that there's a hint that the Secretary of State will overrule you, then they go to the Secretary of State and cut you out' (interview). 'Departments view junior ministers differently – they are aware of the degree of power they have in practice', said another former minister. 'How are decisions taken in the department? Is it all going to the Cabinet minister or does the junior minister count? People sniff out where the power is in the department. Departments do have policy views and there can be "appeals" to the top minister. If you're doing something contrary to the departmental view there could be a struggle' (interview).

Fitting into the established pattern, Labour's junior ministers inevitably did a lot of low-level bread-and-butter ministerial work. They were involved in making everyday decisions that had to be made in relation to local government or to government agencies. In the Home Office the minister for immigration and asylum routinely dealt with a huge volume of casework, with trolley loads of files taken daily into his or her office, and it was the same for the junior minister dealing with prisons and parole. Visits, conferences and ministerial 'ambassadorial' work filled diaries. However, it would be wrong to dismiss such activities as unimportant or 'pointless' – giving speeches at conferences, for instance, could help maintain good working relations with key interest and

stakeholder groups (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, p. 9). It is a key task of all ministers to represent at home and abroad the department, the government and their party – helping to maintain what Rhodes (2011, pp. 105-7) calls ‘the appearance of rule’. At the Foreign Office officials were anxious for ministers to visit their country of responsibility; in 18 months there Peter Hain flew 250,000 miles (Hain, 2012, pp. 222-3). There could be a lot of parliamentary work, taking through legislation. Demands on ministers from Parliament increased, with half a dozen or more Westminster Hall debates a day, which junior ministers usually respond to (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.13). ‘Select Committees need a lot of preparation and work put in’, recalled one junior minister. ‘You cannot afford to get that wrong. At Question Time, if all else fails, you can attack. At Select Committees that won’t work – you need command of the brief, it’s less partisan and there’s less knock about’ (interview).

Ministers of State under Labour were normally allocated a substantial block of departmental and policy-making work. A small number of Ministers of State were designated as entitled to attend Cabinet meetings despite not being members of it, particularly in the Brown government when it was a way of highlighting the representation of women at the top of government. In the first term it was notable how ambitious Blairite Ministers of State Alan Milburn (at Health) and Stephen Byers (at Education) were given a lot of policy responsibility by their respective Secretaries of State. Ian McCartney, Minister of State at the Department of Trade and Industry (1997-99) and highly regarded both in Number 10 and by his ally John Prescott, pushed through the national minimum wage. Minister of State was usually seen as a higher rank, politically

and governmentally, than Parliamentary Under Secretary, with more scope to influence policy and take decisions, but there was variability. Dan Corry, a Labour special adviser, thought 'the way Secretaries of State see them, they see Ministers of State as very important to them and they want them to be driving an area of policy. Sometimes the feed down to the PUSs [sic] is less good. Usually, they will have a bit of policy, where they can get their teeth into it, see if there is something they can do with it, and drive it. But they will be the ones having to do the dinners that no-one else wants to do' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.314). On the parliamentary side, it was significant that in 2003 when a new Secretary of State for DfID was appointed, Baroness Amos, a new job was quickly created for a Minister of State in that department because 'it was felt that you can't have a parliamentary secretary as the lead minister in the Commons' (interview; see also: Blunkett, 2006, pp. 496-7).

On the other hand, Jeff Rooker, a Minister of State in the Commons and then the Lords for 11 years, said 'in most of the departments I was in, you wouldn't have known any hierarchy between Parliamentary Under-Secretaries and Ministers of State . . . You're either in the Cabinet or you're not, and the person running the department, the Secretary of State, sets the tone of the department, and is the person who decides what roles the juniors should have.' 'You could abolish the ranking. It should be abolished', he argued. 'You need to flatten the hierarchy' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.47). Some departments in practice had a flat structure, and some Cabinet ministers (Ed Balls and Peter Mandelson cited as examples in interviews) seemed to prefer that approach, with no real distinction between the two ranks of junior ministers, everyone having their own portfolios, answering to the Secretary of

State. In others, there was more of a sense of two tiers: Parliamentary Secretaries and Ministers of State. 'On some things I would be left to get on with it; on others it was a question of squaring the minister of state', recalled a Parliamentary Secretary in DEFRA. 'In practice things were not too difficult: it's a question of personalities' (interview). But in cases where a Parliamentary Secretary worked under a Minister of State there were sometimes complaints of the bottom-rung minister not getting enough 'elbow room' or 'enough work to do' (Blunkett, 2006: 40). Working to Michael Meacher, the Minister of State in DETR, for instance, Chris Mullin found 'anything remotely interesting or likely to generate even a morsel of publicity, he greedily hoards' (Mullin, 2009, p. 120). One suggestion is that because Meacher – seen as a left-wing loose cannon – had his own work as a Minister of State at DEFRA closely monitored by the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary, who checked his letters before they went out, he in turn treated his own underlings as he had been treated.

When Labour came to government it initially ran away days for ministers to allow them to talk about the bigger picture and the government's overall objectives. Also, groups of junior ministers would meet with Blair every now and again, 'so he could hear their views and give pep talks'. 'He normally recognised most of them', noted Jonathan Powell (2010, p. 71) sardonically. 'We would [be called into Number 10 to] have a little lecture from the management', recalled Lord Rooker, 'and be allowed to ask a few questions.' 'But I noticed', he went on, 'after about three or four years, Tony stopped doing it' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.92). Some limited ministerial training events were also introduced, with induction seminars for new ministers, a two-day 'leadership event' for Parliamentary Secretaries and whips, group workshops

and individual briefing sessions. But inevitably most ministers learned the hard way – on the job (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, p. 40).

### **Junior ministers in the House of Lords**

Overall, one fifth of Labour's junior ministers 1997-2010 served in the House of Lords. 'Being in the Upper House meant it was more of a parliamentary role than for House of Commons colleagues', recalled one former junior minister (interview). The job of handling the government's business in the Lords and taking through legislation is shared with Lords' whips who speak on behalf of departments. 'The parliamentary work of being a Lords minister is very demanding', was Lord Adonis's experience, because you are the only minister in your department in the Lords and have to cover 'the whole waterfront in that department' and not just your own sphere of departmental responsibilities (Public Administration Select Committee, 2010a, q.148). Labour's Lords junior ministers were thus often dealing with the equivalent parliamentary work of four or more Commons ministers, and in a period when the Lords was becoming a more active and demanding chamber (Yong and Hazell, 2011, p. 36). 'I was very active in the House of Lords', said one. 'They are an expert audience and you really have to know your stuff' (interview). 'You need to be quick', said another minister, 'at recognising the issues where you might be defeated so you can negotiate with the department, and show the House that you are listening to them' (interview). It did not always work out well, however, as some junior

ministers in the Lords were felt to be 'not really plugged into the department' and 'really struggled' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2010a, p. 19).

One Lords' minister highlighted the sort of problems that could occur: 'where I didn't have executive responsibility in the department it was more tricky – they didn't automatically consult or take it on board when you pointed out difficulties looming in the Lords. Bill teams and the policy people in departments sometimes need to be kicked to get the House of Lords minister involved, especially if a bill starts in the Commons, so they know the questions looming and the difficulties ahead. I would have to do deals in the Lords with the Lib-Dems to get bills through. House of Commons people don't understand the Lords' (interview). On the positive side, however, Lords' junior ministers believed that there was 'more collegiate working as a group of ministers in the Lords – in the Commons it's more individualistic and competitive' (interview). 'There is a camaraderie among Lords' ministers', one explained. 'Most of us are junior ministers. We met at least once a week – and there was a lot more cohesion, mutual support and understanding of our position [than in the Commons]. The Leader of the Lords chaired the weekly meeting of Lords' ministers, and there was a mix of political discussion and business. Every six months or so there was an away day for political discussion' (interview).

Brought directly in to the Lords as 'outsider' ministers, Gordon Brown's 'GOATs' attracted a great deal of attention (Public Administration Select Committee, 2010a; Yong and Hazell, 2011). The 'government of all the talents' initiative was in part about widening the talent pool and bringing in outside expertise, and in part about projecting Brown as an inclusive rather than tribal politician (Seldon and Lodge, 2010, p. 10). These appointments included Mark

Malloch Brown, a former UN diplomat, as a Foreign Office minister; Digby Jones, a business leader, as a trade minister; and a surgeon, Lord Darzi, as a junior minister at Health. Later Brown appointments included businessman Lord Myners as City minister in the Treasury and the banker Mervyn Davies as a trade minister. One special adviser interviewed thought it had been a 'poorly thought-through' initiative, 'all about tactics . . . it wasn't the right people with enough to do.' While Darzi and Myners were widely praised as effective ministers and excellent appointments, others found it difficult to adjust to and deal with the political and parliamentary environment, Lord (Digby) Jones leaving after only 16 months, for instance (in which time he made 45 overseas visits to 31 countries). Blair had also appointed some businessmen-outsiders as junior ministers in the Lords (Lord Simon and Gus MacDonald), and later there were some similar appointments under Cameron (including the banker Lord Green as trade minister and Lord Sassoon as Commercial Secretary to the Treasury). But Brown tried it on a slightly bigger scale (on one count, making ten such appointments [Public Administration Select Committee, 2010a, p. 8]), and to a wider range of posts than other PMs, though with mixed results.

### **The ministerial merry-go-round**

Mirroring the Conservative experience 1979-97, the career hierarchy of government under Labour was constantly moving over the 13 years after 1997, with an increasing proportion of Cabinet posts filled by those tested on the lower rungs of the ministerial ladder. In 1997, after 18 years in Opposition, few Labour



ministers at any level in the first Blair government had experience of serving in government: only four members of the Cabinet and four junior ministers then had previous junior ministerial experience (with only the Attorney-General, John Morris, having previously sat in a Labour Cabinet). In contrast, only five of the 2010 Labour Cabinet (including prime minister Gordon Brown himself) had not previously served as junior ministers. The general pattern (though there were variations) was for Labour Cabinet ministers to have held two or three junior minister posts for a total of three to four years before reaching the Cabinet.

A total of 223 individuals held junior ministerial office at different times over the period of Labour rule, 1997-2010 (two served in both the Commons and the Lords, and are counted twice in Table 1). Overall, 79 per cent of initial appointments were to Parliamentary Under Secretary posts while 21 per cent came in at Minister of State level. Nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of Ministers of State had first been Parliamentary Secretaries. More than half of all Parliamentary Secretaries and two-thirds of the Ministers of State rose no higher on the ladder. A total of 64 individuals held just one Parliamentary Under Secretary post for an average of two years in the course of their whole ministerial 'career' (that is over a third of all Parliamentary Secretaries). As in the Thatcher/Major Conservative governments, so under Blair and Brown most junior ministers never made it beyond the bottom rungs on the ladder, and only one in five (21 per cent) eventually reached the Cabinet. Fully 90 per cent of those promoted to the Cabinet had been Ministers of State, only a handful (including the present Leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband) making it to the top table straight from the Parliamentary Secretary level. Table 1 summarises the career movements of Labour junior ministers.

*Table 1. Career destinations of Labour junior ministers 1997-2010*

	All	Men	Women	Commons	Lords
Parl. Sec. and no higher	96 42.7%	71 43.8%	25 39.7%	74 41.3%	22 47.8%
Min. of State and no higher	77 34.2%	56 34.6%	21 33.3%	62 34.6%	15 32.6%
Other posts	4 1.8%	2 1.2%	2 3.2%	2 1.2%	2 4.4%
Cabinet	48 21.3%	33 20.4%	15 23.8%	41 22.9%	7 15.2%
Total	225	162	63	179	46

'Other posts' means Chief Whip and Law Officer. Two individuals served in both the Commons and the Lords and are counted in both columns.

With only two Cabinet slots filled by peers for most of the Labour period (except when there were, unusually, three peers serving as full members of Brown's Cabinet, two of them – Lords Mandelson and Adonis – holding important departmental portfolios), there is a glass ceiling to the career ladder of most Lords' ministers. A major reason for the reluctance to appoint peers to senior Cabinet positions is the inability of Lords' ministers to speak and answer questions in the Commons. Minister of State is therefore effectively the highest level to which most peers in government can aspire. Another sort of glass ceiling had been evident in the Conservative years 1979-1997 when only 8 per cent of all junior ministers (18 individuals) were female, reflecting the small number of Tory female MPs from which to choose ministers, and their promotion prospects were worse than those of their male counter-parts (only 16 per cent reaching the Cabinet, compared to 21 per cent of men). However, fully 28 per cent of Labour's junior ministers were female and their promotion prospects – as measured by

the percentages reaching the Cabinet - were slightly better than those of Labour's male junior ministers.

Though there was some semblance of planning on a grid, the appointment and reshuffling of junior ministers could be a pretty haphazard 'mass-production exercise', as Blair's aide Jonathan Powell (2010, p. 147) recalled. 'Reshuffles are like air traffic control', said a minister in interview. 'There are stacks of incoming and outgoing people being balanced and dealt with. Sometimes it was planned with magnets moved around a board, but tales are told of getting through it all and finding that someone's been left out.' 'All reshuffles appear to be last-minute and under pressure', was David Blunkett's experience (2006, p. 512). Prime ministers, it is widely felt, do not give enough attention in general to junior appointments, job-moves and dismissals that, as a result, could often be 'random and arbitrary' (Riddell et al, 2011, p. 18). A disgruntled former minister felt Blair attached no importance to junior ministerial jobs: 'he regards them as sweeties to be handed out to keep the children happy' (Mullin, 2011, p.13). A former Number 10 special adviser under Blair said in interview that 'the extent to which the PM decides on who is appointed within a department will depend on how interested he is in the work of that department and on the power and influence of the respective Cabinet minister . . . If you're a minister in a department that the Prime Minister is not bothered about, he doesn't really care who gets the job' (interview). But Blair, it was suggested, placed some up-and-coming junior and middle-ranking ministers, in key departments as they 'shared Downing Street's policy drive and were able to communicate this' (interview).

As ever with ministerial appointments and reshuffles, it was not a case of matching the experience and skills of MPs and ministers against the

requirements of particular posts in a rational and systematic way but more an exercise in political management and bargaining (Alderman, 1976; Alderman and Cross, 1979; Alderman and Carter, 1992; Theakston, 1987). Previous experience or expertise often counted for little. Half of the new junior ministers in 1997 were switched into different government posts from those they had shadowed immediately before the election (Joyce Quin, who had been shadow Europe minister, being sent to the Home Office as prisons minister, for instance, while Doug Henderson who had been in the shadow Defence team was made Europe minister at the Foreign Office). The Whips' Office would have an important influence over appointments and moves, and it was used after 1997, much more than under previous Labour governments, to blood new talent and as a pool from which junior ministers could be picked (Cowley, 2005, pp. 181-2, 236-8; Theakston, 1987, p. 52). Key Number 10 advisers, such as Sally Morgan (Blair's Director of Government Relations) had an important say (Cowley, 2005, p. 217), and the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretaries also had the job of 'keeping an eye on . . . MPs and making a report back on how they were performing and what they were doing' (Blunkett, 2006, p. 20). Parliamentary performance and doing well in the chamber was vital in promotion decisions, but permanent secretaries would also feed in private advice to Number 10 about which junior ministers were doing well in their departmental work and who was less on top of their brief (Powell, 2010, p. 148).

Senior figures would push hard to include, promote or protect their allies or clients in the government – as Gordon Brown and John Prescott did under Blair – but other Cabinet ministers would sometimes have no more than a limited influence and choice or a possible veto. Blair's most difficult negotiations

were invariably with Brown as they haggled grimly over possible moves or jobs for the latter's protégés and supporters. 'Cabinet ministers are consulted on appointments in their departments', recalled a former Secretary of State in interview. 'If you didn't want someone they wouldn't be forced on you.' Much depended, though, on political clout and 'place in the pecking order' (Riddell et al, 2011, p. 18). For instance, Ruth Kelly was overruled when she tried to resist the appointment of the ultra-Blairite Andrew Adonis as a junior minister in her Education department in 2005 (though Blair had to compromise to the extent of appoint Adonis as a Parliamentary Under Secretary rather than, as he had wanted to, a Minister of State). But Alistair Darling managed to block the proposed appointment of Brown's adviser Shriti Vadera as a minister in his Treasury team in 2008, not wanting 'a spy in the cab, which is what Gordon wanted her there for' (Darling, 2011, p. 112).

'Reshuffles are like a jigsaw puzzle', Peter Hain recalled (2012, p. 213). 'One appointment impacts upon another as people are contacted, moved and sacked in a complex process of person management, joy and tears.' Sometimes junior ministers were sacked not because of 'lack of merit', admitted Jonathan Powell (2010, pp. 144-5), but simply because 'we needed the headroom to promote others' and 'give everyone a chance'. Chris Mullin (2009, p. 292) described what happened to one hapless minister: 'There she was working hard, doing (or so she thought) a reasonable job and with no inkling of what was to come. The Man [Blair] told her she had had a good run and that was that. At the lower end of the pecking order, reshuffles are an entirely random process. No one had anything against her. Her name just fell off the end of the page because,

once the new faces had been accommodated, there was no one to speak up for her.’

Forming and reshuffling governments is something of a balancing act with considerations of party and factional balance, the need to maintain loyalty and image management always at the front of the prime minister’s mind (Yong and Hazell, 2011, p. 13; Blair, 2010, pp. 593-4). Though there were exceptions (such as Chris Mullin), persistent rebels tended to find themselves stuck on the backbenches, appointments and promotions going largely to the loyalists and the occasional rebels, and with some ex-ministers coming back in reshuffles for another stint in office to show other ‘exes’ that all was not lost and keep them on side (Cowley, 2005, pp. 164-5, 171, 208-13). The need for Blair to be sensitive to perceived New Labour/Old Labour divisions in assembling his team in 1997 soon faded. But reshuffles, and promotions and demotions, were always carefully studied for their impact on the balance between the rival Blair and Brown camps. ‘Representativeness’ was also an important factor, with Blair wanting to promote more diversity and appoint more women to government jobs in the Cabinet and at junior level, as well as MPs from London and the South of England and not just Labour’s heartlands in the North and Scotland. That this could backfire was shown in 2009 when Europe minister Caroline Flint quit the government, accusing Brown of operating a ‘two-tier government’ and of using her and other women ministers as ‘female window dressing’ (though there were also suggestions that she was unhappy at not being promoted to a Cabinet post). The attempt to balance in party, regional or gender terms, according to Dan Corry, meant that ‘sometimes there’d be someone you’d think, “What on earth are they doing in that department? They’re not that great or they don’t know

anything about the topic” (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.338).

There was a strong sense in the Labour years of a favoured group of younger politicians with a ‘fast track’ route to preferment and senior jobs (Mullin, 2009, p. 293). One junior minister interviewed referred to himself as one of the ‘non-golden circle’ MPs eventually given a chance and brought into government. But historically in British government many junior ministers are seen as placemen and not expected to rise further, and the high-flyers have always started climbing the ladder younger than those who do not make it (Theakston, 1987, pp. 8, 58-9) – and the Labour years were no different in that respect. The average age on first junior-minister appointment of those who went on to become Cabinet ministers in the Labour government was 45, compared to 49 for those who did not get that far (49 being the average age on appointment to the Cabinet for those junior ministers who reached it). As many as 26 per cent of those later promoted to the Cabinet were first made junior ministers under the age of 40, compared to 15 per cent being over 50 at the time of their first appointment. ‘I knew I was vulnerable’, said a junior minister sacked in 1998. ‘When so many Cabinet ministers are in their forties, junior ministers in their fifties have a short shelf life.’ There was a belief in the Blair years that being older than the Prime Minister ‘was not a helpful career asset’, noted Joyce Quin (2010, p. 23). When Brown promoted James Purnell (age 37), Andy Burnham (38) and Yvette Cooper (38) to the Cabinet in 2008, a host of competent middle-ranking Ministers of State from an older generation knew their chances of reaching the top level had probably gone for good. The Labour years were part of an established pattern whereby anyone coming into politics at 50 years old is a

virtual non-starter in the promotion stakes on age grounds alone, so far behind that they cannot catch up (Public Administration Select Committee, 2010a, p. 11).

Consistent with the idea of a 'fast-track' and 'early starters' is the fact that those Labour junior ministers in the Commons who in time reached the Cabinet had served for an average of five years as backbench MPs before receiving their first junior ministerial post, compared to eight years prior parliamentary service for those who never made it beyond the junior ministerial level. Some of those reaching the Cabinet had even less service in the Commons before getting on the ministerial ladder: six were plucked off the backbenches after only a year and four after only two years as MPs. Gordon Brown pressed Tony Blair to appoint Ed Balls straight to the government when he was elected in 2005 but Blair refused, saying it would be 'inappropriate', and Balls had to wait a year before he got his first job (Blair, 2010, p. 528).

The argument that there was too much 'ministerial churn' and that Labour's junior ministers were moved around too quickly was frequently heard (Clearly and Reeves, 2009). The junior-ministerial turnover in the Labour years was in fact at a faster rate than in the Conservative government 1979-97 (Table 2). As in previous governments there was something of a 'up or out' system combined with a fast-moving ministerial merry-go-round. Nearly half of those never making it to the Cabinet held just one post in their ministerial 'career' while the Cabinet-bound clocked up more experience (Table 3). There were variations, however, with some individuals holding just one junior post for two years or less before being promoted to the Cabinet (including: Alan Milburn, Stephen Byers, Baroness Jay, Baroness Amos, Ed Balls and Ed Miliband) while at



the other extreme it took Ben Bradshaw eight years and five jobs before he reached Cabinet level. Against the criticisms that frequent reshuffles and rapid ministerial turnover undermines the effectiveness of ministers, leads to damaging short-termism, mitigates against a build-up of expertise and experience, and weakens policy-making (Clearly and Reeves, 2009; Riddell et al, 2011, pp. 20-1), is the argument that they have advantages in freshening and revitalising governments (particularly long-serving ones), are necessary for party management purposes, and are a way of weeding out the unsuccessful ministers and moving the best performing ones around the government (Alderman, 1995). In the case of junior and middle-ranking ministers in particular there clearly also remained a strong sense that service in a number of different posts and departments tested and developed the political and parliamentary skills and the broad experience necessary at Cabinet level (Theakston, 1987, pp. 64-5; Alderman, 1995, p. 504).

*Table 2. Tenure of junior ministerial posts.*

	12 months or less	13-24 months	25-36 months	37-48 months	More than 48 months
Conservative Government 1979-97	21%	34%	26%	11%	8%
Labour Government 1997-2010	38%	40%	14%	5%	3%

1979-97 data from: Theakston (1999), p.243.

*Table 3. Number of junior ministerial posts held by Labour ministers 1997-2010.*

	Number of junior minister posts held			
	1	2	3	4 or more
Never promoted above junior minister rank	47%	20%	14%	18%
Reaching the Cabinet	25%	21%	30%	23%

Looking at the departments served in by those who climbed to the Cabinet, it is clear from our research that the route to the top for Labour junior ministers lay predominantly through service in the key central departments (Treasury, Foreign Office, Cabinet Office) and/or in the big domestic ministries (Health, Education, Trade and Industry [later Business], Work and Pensions [earlier Social Security], the Home Office). Relatively few junior ministers serving in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Ministry of Defence, the Justice Ministry, Transport, or the national ministries for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland made it to the Cabinet. The ministerial generalist remained the norm and the experience of Estelle Morris – successively Parliamentary Under Secretary (1997-8), Minister of State (1998-2001) and then Secretary of State (2001-3) in the same ministry – the Department for Education and Skills – was exceptional. In all 40 per cent of those promoted to the Cabinet had some previous experience of the department they were appointed to head, but mostly in careers marked by service in other departments too either as junior or as Cabinet ministers.

A distinctive feature of the Labour years was the number of junior-ministerial ‘retreads’ and ministers who moved down as well as up the normal hierarchy. Six ministers occupied junior minister level posts after serving in the

Cabinet (including two – Harriet Harman and Geoff Hoon – who afterwards made it back into the Cabinet). At least another 13 junior and middle-ranking ministers had periods of interrupted service, such as Beverley Hughes (who was brought back a year after resigning as a Home Office minister in 2004), Tom Watson (a Brownite who resigned from the Ministry of Defence in 2006 as part of a concerted effort to force Blair from office and was reappointed as a Cabinet Office junior minister in 2008), and Lord Hunt of Kings Heath (who resigned in 2003 in protest against the Iraq war but returned to government in 2005). Such (re)appointments have not been unknown in other governments but the larger number of these cases in the Labour government owed something to the Blair-Brown factional divide, a perceived shortage of ministerial talent, a desire to 'compensate' ministers forced out of other posts, and party management considerations.

## **Conclusion**

British governments are, overall, bigger and have many more junior ministers than their international counterparts (Theakston, 1987, p.167; Public Administration Select Committee, 2010b, pp. 3-4). Complaints that there were too many ministers gathered force during the Labour years, culminating in proposals from the Public Administration Select Committee (2010b) for the reduction of around a third in the number of ministers and a limit on the payroll vote of 15 per cent of the membership of the House of Commons. Departments, it suggested, should have on average three ministers each, with a total of 20

Cabinet ministers and 40 ministers of state and parliamentary secretaries. Under Labour, the trend was in the other direction. Although devolution led to a halving of the number of Westminster ministers representing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland from 14 in 1997 to seven in 2010, there was an increase in the overall total number of government ministers because ministerial posts in other departments increased (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.103).

‘You could cut 20 per cent of ministers without serious detriment’ said one minister in interview. However, if the number of ministers was to be cut the result could be reduced accountability, overloading of Secretaries of State, and civil servants taking decisions that should be taken by ministers (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, p.16). Blair adviser Lord Birt maintained that ‘if you do away with junior ministers you have an increasingly isolated [Cabinet] minister, surrounded by the Civil Service.’ The issue, therefore, was really one of using ministers ‘well and intelligently’ (Public Administration Select Committee, 2009, q.341). Chris Mullin’s argument was that it is no good just cutting numbers arbitrarily because that will just ‘heap more work’ – ministerial functions would have to be reviewed and changed (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011, q.59).

Qualifying the impression given in his diaries, Chris Mullin has admitted that ‘there is a huge variation in junior ministerial jobs’ (Mullin, 2011, p.2). Junior ministers with Secretaries of State willing and able to delegate would find that life in government could be immensely fulfilling. His two years at the Foreign Office as Africa Minister under Jack Straw, who knew how to delegate, were, he has said, among the happiest of his political life. However, for those on the bottom rung in a big department with a different approach taken by the top

minister, ministerial life will be 'a cascade of all the things that their many superiors don't want to do.' There was 'no shortage of work' for junior ministers, he told the Public Administration Select Committee (2011, qs. 3-6), saying only that there was 'a certain amount of pointless activity that could be cut out', and arguing there had been an increase in pointless activity.

Ultimately, Mullin's diaries give a colourful but misleading impression of the role and significance of junior ministers, and of their experience in the Labour government. There were strong continuities from the Thatcher/Major Conservative years, but there were also important developments in relation to greater 'ministerial churn', the emergence of a fast-tracked 'golden circle' of favoured and rapidly-promoted ministers, the appointment of more outsiders brought in to government through the Lords, and the confirmation of Ministers of State as (usually) ministerial policy-makers with real clout and substance.

Reviewing Mullin's diaries, Tony McNulty, who served for seven years (2002-9) in four different departments, reaching Minister of State rank, can perhaps have the last word, arguing Mullin went 'too far in denigrating the role. Yes, ministerial roles can mean being stranded in a quagmire of impenetrable dross and endless letter-signing, but they also allow for greater influence and decision-making, and indeed, it remains, or should remain, a real privilege to serve. Often, and especially at junior level, it is the way the minister does the job they have been given that ensures influence or impact ... Not everyone can go straight into Cabinet, not everyone is a star – junior ministerial roles do matter' (McNulty, 2011).

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